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**STEPHEN HARPER, LEO STRAUSS  
AND THE POLITICS OF FEAR**

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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## ABSTRACT

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This paper compares the political ideas of Stephen Harper and the controversial philosopher, Leo Strauss. It focuses specifically on these thinkers' shared fear of the United Nations, using Strauss' more penetrating and systematic thought to clarify the deeper assumptions underlying Harper's attitude toward the institution. The first such assumption is the belief that western nations' support for the UN is symptomatic of a weak-willed liberalism that is unwilling to face its enemies. No less important, however, is the assumption that it is precisely through the encounter with a deadly enemy that the nation-state can be returned to moral and political health. These views, I argue, help to explain an era in Canadian foreign policy that has been marked by strained relations with the UN and an abiding preoccupation with the threat of terrorism.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

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A handful of Canadian academics and journalists have attempted to draw a link between Stephen Harper and the German émigré political philosopher, Leo Strauss. (Drury 2011; Gutstein 2005; Lenihan 2013; Russell 2008; Salutin 2010; see also Stephane Dion's comments in Martin 2010, 123). The claim has almost always taken on the tone of a conspiracy theory. Especially since the election of George W. Bush in 2000, Strauss has been identified as the author of a grand neoconservative design to recast American values and foreign policy in a new and more aggressive mould. The American invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq released a small wave of scholarship trying to show the influence of Strauss on key neoconservative figures within the Bush administration, a list which usually included Deputy Secretary of Defence, Paul Wolfowitz, and Defence Policy Board chair, Richard Perle (Drolet 2011; Hirst 2013; Norton 2005; Xenos 2008). The alleged aim of this group was to impose a new, more conservative shape on America's political culture, while simultaneously extending the nation's influence abroad through a series of grand patriotic wars.

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***Strauss's thought casts an illuminating light on many of Harper's foreign policy statements and actions, especially on his evident distaste for international institutions and agreements which pose limits on national sovereignty in the name of greater world order.***

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Harper has been cast by his accusers as the chief Canadian operative in this Straussian network, charged with opening up its northern front. The éminence grise in this case is not an individual, but a group of academics from the University of Calgary whose members are purportedly devotees of Strauss' thought. The 'Calgary School', which includes Barry Cooper, Ranier Knopff and Harper's one-time chief advisor, Thomas Flanagan, have only one policy agenda, according to journalist Marci Macdonald (2004): to "wipe out the quirky bilateral differences that are stumbling blocks to seamless integration with the United States." In Macdonald's account, the School converted the young Harper during his years as a master's student in economics and have continued to influence him during his tenure as prime minister.

The claim that Harper is the product of Straussian indoctrination has been met with fitting scepticism by journalists Peter Foster (2006) and Robert Sibley (2006), both of whom point to the flimsy circumstantial evidence behind the charge. To begin with, none of the academics who make up the alleged cabal explicitly identify themselves as disciples of

Strauss. And although Flanagan at one time had close contact with Harper (before a messy parting of ways), there is little to suggest that the School has exercised undue influence on the Prime Minister. Sibley allows that Harper may very well have rubbed up against Strauss' ideas during his time at the University of Calgary, but wholly rejects the notion that this puts him at the centre of some sort of shadowy plot.

Notwithstanding the difficulty of establishing any direct contact with Strauss' ideas, however, it is possible to demonstrate a strong affinity between Harper's political ideas and some core Straussian teachings. This is most obviously the case in the realm of foreign policy, where the Harper government has struggled to "rebrand" the nation by reversing a long-standing Canadian identification with the internationalist goals and ideals of the UN (McLeod Group 2012; Richler; Mackay & Swift; Richler; Staring 2013).<sup>1</sup> Some critics have attributed Harper's position to a materialistic preoccupation with power and economic advantage (Engler 2012), which is ill-served by high-minded international treaties and regulations issuing from New York. While this explanation captures part of the truth, the prime minister's words and actions reveal that his antipathy to the UN is also fuelled by deeper moral concern. Over the years, Harper has repeatedly cautioned that Canada's commitment to the UN is symptomatic of a dangerous relativism which accepts all ways of life as equally worthy of respect and undermines any willingness to fight for what is truly good and noble.

The anxieties that Harper has expressed toward the UN in many ways echo the dire pronouncements that Strauss issued in his writings against modern society's dreams of creating peace and abundance through a universal world order. For Strauss, such a vision could only be achieved by abandoning the conviction that there is an unchanging hierarchy of goods or ends according to which one way of life can be judged to be higher or better than another. When human beings give up the search for such a standard, he warned, they give up their humanity. These dire warnings against world government have had a defining influence on neoconservative foreign policy in the views of some experts (Drolet 2011; Hirst 2013; Kristol 2003; Norton 2005; Xenos 2008).

It seems quite plausible that Harper has at least indirectly been influenced by Strauss's ideas through exposure to the neoconservative discourse that helped to define American public debate, especially during the early years of the George W. Bush regime. Whatever the case may be, Strauss's thought casts an illuminating light on many of Harper's foreign policy statements and actions, especially on his evident distaste for international institutions and agreements which pose limits on national sovereignty in the name of greater world order. Strauss gives a more complete philosophical expression to this position and reveals both its foundational assumptions and its wider implications.

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<sup>1</sup> There has been no shortage of commentary on Harper's cool, at times adversarial relationship with the UN (Caplan 2010; McLeod Group 2012; Richler ; Mackay & Swift 2012; Richler 2012; Staring 2013).

## 2. HARPER AND THE UNITED NATIONS

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One of the earliest indications of Harper's attitude toward the UN came in 2003, three years before the newly minted Conservative Party formed their first minority government. The Chrétien Liberals' refusal to join the US-led invasion of Iraq invited unmitigated scorn from the neophyte opposition leader. Speaking on CTV's *Question Period*, Harper grumbled that "this government's only explanation for not standing behind our allies is that they couldn't get the approval of the Security Council at the United Nations—a body [on] which Canada doesn't even have a seat" (Harper 2003a). A month later, Harper provided an unambiguous statement as to why Canada should have participated in the mission. Speaking to a crowd at a Friends of America rally, Harper exclaimed:

Thank you for saying to our friends in the United States of America, you are our ally, our neighbour, and our best friend in the whole wide world. And when your brave men and women give their lives for freedom and democracy we are not neutral. We do not stand on the sidelines; we're for the disarmament of Saddam and the liberation of the people of Iraq (quoted in Bloomfield and Nossal 2013, 149).

These two remarks offer a glimpse of some recurring themes in Harper's comments on the UN over the years. First, there is a jealous guarding of national sovereignty and the suggestion that to join an alliance with a friend is to exercise that sovereignty, while to heed the appeal to an international institution on which one does not "even have a seat" is to abdicate it. Second, there is the suggestion that Canada's decision to go along with the UN represented an attempt to remain "neutral," rather than to exercise its will by taking a moral stance and defending it with military action. These fears have very much defined Harper's chilly relations with the UN since he took power.

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***The anxiety that the UN is overreaching its multilateral origins and striving to establish itself as a political order that supervenes national sovereignty has roots that reach beyond the restless psyche of the current regime in Ottawa.***

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In September 2014, Harper surprised many pundits not only by delivering a speech at the opening of the UN General Assembly, but one that focused largely on the financial responsibility of richer nations towards poorer ones (Harper 2014a). Harper had attended the General Assembly's opening only twice before this. On his first visit in 2006, Harper delivered a withering reproach to the UN for failing to bring security to Afghanistan and other destabilized nations around the world. As one expert observed, the Prime Minister left little doubt as to his feelings, "questioning the international body's relevance in language that might just as easily have been used by someone like Jeane Kirkpatrick," the staunch neoconservative who served as Reagan's ambassador to the UN (Smith 24-25).

Harper made his second visit to the General Assembly in 2010, when he was seeking a prestigious seat for Canada on the Security Council. Despite throwing millions of dollars and a great deal of diplomatic resources at this latter gambit, the bid, not surprisingly, was rejected. Many reasons were adduced for the humiliating defeat: the Harper government's outspoken support for Israel and no less outspoken criticism of the UN's stance on the country; its cuts to African foreign aid; its abandonment of the principles of the Kyoto Accord (which it finally pulled out of in 2011); or more probably, a combination of all of these factors and more. The UN's reproof, however, did nothing to put Harper on better behaviour with the organization. For the next two years, the Prime Minister travelled to New York during the opening session of the General Assembly but snubbed the event.

Instead, he sent his foreign affairs minister, John Baird, who in 2011 delivered what struck many as a strident attack on the UN. The gist of Baird's criticism was that the UN of today had lost its moral bearings and was in "slow decline." It had allowed regimes to sign conventions or sit on commissions meant to enforce human rights of which they were in clear violation. Perhaps more seriously, it showed little resolve to respond to human rights abuses or security threats with decisive action. Echoing his leader, Baird saw the organization's failure as somehow being wrapped up with the eclipse of the nation-state. "State sovereignty," he lectured, "is not created by multilateral institutions. Instead, multilateral institutions exist and derive legitimacy from the independent decisions of sovereign states." Multilateral institutions like the UN, he went on, had legitimacy only insofar as they represented "a collection of sovereign decisions based on individual states' own interests." Baird clarified that he was not speaking here of "narrow self-interest" but of "an expanded view of mutual interest," one which encompassed the shared moral goals of like-minded nations. Collective decision-making in this more expansive sense, he pointed out, was different from seeking mere "uniformity" or "consensus." Consensus really meant compromising one's sovereign moral authority in order to accommodate the world's dictators and rights abusers. He underscored his point with a quote from Margaret Thatcher: "consensus seems to be the process of abandoning all beliefs, principles, values and policies. So it is something in which no one believes" (Baird 2011).

Behind the Harper government's ongoing verbal attacks against the UN, one detects a predominating fear. As Carolyn McAskie has observed, "time and again," the party's official statements "refer to 'the UN' as if it were an entity in its own right with its own source of funds, influence and decision-making power," rather than "than the sum of its member states, Canada included" (McAskie 2011, 7). What the Harper government seems to fear is not just that the present-day UN somehow threatens the authority of the nation-state, but that the UN is establishing itself as an independent locus of supranational political authority.

The anxiety that the UN is overreaching its multilateral origins and striving to establish itself as a political order that supervenes national sovereignty has roots that reach beyond the restless psyche of the current regime in Ottawa. It is also an *idée fixe* of American neoconservatism. Irving Kristol (2003), the so-called godfather of neoconservatism, observes that one of the movement's only consistent foreign policy principles is opposition to what he describes as the idea of "world government" (24). Jean-François Drolet (2011) also identifies

resistance to “global liberal governance” (161) as one of the core tenets of the movement, and has mapped out how this opposition has been translated into well-funded support for policy, advocacy groups and research organizations that seek to weaken American support for international institutions like the UN and the World Court. Both Kristol and Drolet trace this neoconservative preoccupation with the universalizing impulses of such organizations back to a common philosophical source, Leo Strauss.<sup>2</sup>

### 3. LEO STRAUSS AND THE TYRANNY OF THE UNIVERSAL STATE

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Strauss’ earliest and most sustained reflections on the dangers of a world state appear in his 1948 (2000) work *On Tyranny*, which includes a now-famous debate with the Russian-born thinker, Alexandre Kojève. Kojève was a philosopher and French statesman whose highly original interpretation of Hegel influenced some of the twentieth century’s most important minds. From 1933-1939, he delivered a celebrated series of lectures on the *Phenomenology of Spirit*<sup>3</sup> at the École Pratique des Hautes Études, which was audited by many of Paris’ leading intellectual lights, including Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Raymond Aron and Georges Bataille. One of the most novel claims to arise from Kojève’s study of Hegel was that world history was moving toward what he labelled the “universal and homogeneous state.” Kojève claimed to find in Hegel proof that history was the story of reason’s gradual self-realization, and that this process would finally culminate in a state of affairs where all fundamental contradictions or disagreements in human relations would be permanently overcome. The result would be a global regime of equal rights that was both universal, overcoming racial divides between nations, and homogeneous, overcoming class divisions within nations (Kojève, 1947).

The published exchange between Strauss and Kojève largely centered on the latter’s depiction of the universal and homogeneous state as the crowning stage in an historical process of human social development. Strauss categorically rejected Kojève’s progressive portrait of this state, arguing that its realization would represent, not the culmination of human history, but the worst tyranny history had ever known. He believed that a glimpse of what such a regime would look like could be seen in the brutal totalitarian systems of communist Russia and China. Both sought to realize a global order predicated on absolute

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<sup>2</sup> Kristol (2003) also mentions Donald Kagan in this context, who along with Strauss, apparently directed neoconservatives to the international relations teachings of Thucydides. For the influence of Strauss on Kristol and neoconservatism more generally, see Douglas Murray (2006).

<sup>3</sup> Some of these lecture were collected by Kojève’s student, Raymond Quéneau, and published in France as *Introduction à la Lectures de Hegel*. They were subsequently published in English (1947) and are widely viewed as one of the twentieth century’s most important treatments of Hegel.



material and legal equality, and in the process held out the “threat of becoming...what no earlier tyranny ever became: perpetual and universal” (Strauss 1961, 27; see also 1964a, 3 and ff).

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***Strauss saw the potential for such a tyranny not just in the brutal regimes of the Marxist east; the danger was also alive in the democratic west.***

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But Strauss saw the potential for such a tyranny not just in the brutal regimes of the Marxist east; the danger was also alive in the democratic west. The coming-to-be of the universal state, Strauss wrote, was equally “appalling,” whether it happened “by one stroke and without mercy or else by slow and gentle processes” (1961, 27). If the west had abjured the brutal means of eastern Marxism, many in our society still believed in the utopian ends it pursued. More particularly, Strauss had in mind those western “liberals” who sought to construct a “federation of all now existing or soon emerging states” under the auspices of “a truly universal and greatly strengthened United Nations organization.” Their vision of the international organization, Strauss claimed, bore “the greatest possible approximation of the universal and homogeneous state” (1968, viii).

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#### **4. LIBERALISM AND RELATIVISM**

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The grounds for this blunt judgment against the UN rested on Strauss’ adherence to the principles of “classical political philosophy,” especially as it was formulated in the works of Plato and Aristotle. The classics, according to Strauss, held that “every political society that ever has been or ever will be rests on a particular fundamental opinion” (1968, x). These opinions, which always involved some judgement about what constitutes the good life, could “not be replaced by knowledge” (1968, x). Such knowledge was impossible, not because “the good” had no objective existence outside of the constructs of a particular society but because our awareness of it was always incomplete and refracted through the particularisms of a given society (1959, 10). In the view of the classic thinkers, Strauss argued, the partial and uncertain character of our fundamental opinions about the good ensured that there would always be violent disagreement over the most important matters. They did not, therefore, contemplate the possibility of a universal and homogeneous state.

Strauss claimed that in our time, the classical understanding of political society had been all but eclipsed by the perspective of the modern social sciences. Seen through the social scientist’s lens, those fundamental opinions about the good that each society holds came to be understood instead as “values.” Central to this notion of values was a relativistic assumption that “all positions of this kind are equally true or untrue: true from within, untrue from without” (Strauss 1989a, 9). The same relativism, according to Strauss, had been taken over

by a broad section of modern liberal society, and it underpinned the liberal belief that very different societies with very different sets of beliefs could peaceably co-exist: societies could commit themselves to pursuing their given ends or values, while accepting that others will also pursue their own different values. Relativists, according to Strauss, maintained that values do not have a rational basis, and therefore cannot provide the ground of agreement upon which a universal society could be built. On the other hand, relativists somehow assumed that there was a rational basis for accommodating or tolerating one another's disparate, irrationally-held values.<sup>4</sup>

One saw this unfounded assumption, for instance, behind the more realist appeal to the UN as a universal federation that brings together powers who perhaps share nothing in common but their desire to protect their own selfish interests by avoiding war. Strauss insisted that this apparently "hardheaded" view of the UN was still idealistic from the classical perspective, as it assumed that the differences of opinion that separated societies from one another were undercut by a more powerful universal agreement that it was not worth dying for these opinions. Every sufficiently developed society would eventually see the ultimate desirability of a commodious and peaceful existence (1968, viii).

Strauss tells us these liberal hopes for a truly universal UN were belied by the grave geopolitical reality that quickly took shape after the war. In the early years of Soviet communism, it was easy for many western liberals to believe that the movement shared the goal of bringing about "the universal prosperous society of free and equal men and women." This belief was nourished by the sense of kindred cause that was created by the battle against a common enemy during the Second World War. But with the end of the war, the Soviet Union began to reveal a much more brutal side. For Strauss the political lesson of "Stalinism and post-Stalinism" was clear: "for the foreseeable future there cannot be a universal state, unitary or federative" (1964a, 4-5). Many liberals seemed to understand this lesson and were willing to stand up and defend their values against the communist threat (1959, 20).

At the same time, Strauss believed that postwar liberalism, insofar as it had absorbed the premises of value relativism, was burdened by an internal weakness that made some liberals vulnerable to idealistic, but vain hopes of reconciliation. For the liberal relativist, the cold war standoff was at bottom a clash of two irreconcilable values—Marxism versus liberalism—neither of which could be shown to be objectively superior. This view of affairs disposed some liberals to trust in the UN as a source of supposedly neutral arbitration. Strauss believed this confidence in the UN was dangerously utopian, predicated on "nothing but an inherited and perhaps antiquated hope," and he worried about the "great risks" attending these attempts at peaceful cooperation with a hostile enemy (1964a, 6).

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<sup>4</sup> In Strauss' words, "Nor do we end in a state of perpetual war of everybody against everybody, for we are permitted to 'trust to reason and the council table for a peaceful coexistence'" (1989a, 9).

## 5. THE STRAUSSIAN LEGACY

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Strauss' attack on western liberals' support for the UN finds a clear resonance in the commentary of some neoconservatives today. Douglas Murray (2006), in his work *Neoconservatism: Why We Need It* (which cites Strauss broadly) issues the following pronouncement against the international organization:

“An organization that presumes to represent the interests of hostile dictatorships can never represent the interests of great democracies. A generation disposed to view the UN's verdict as binding is a generation disposed to global relativism. It reveals itself to be attracted by merely a more pleasant-looking form of unrepresentative tyranny” (203).

Here we find a number of Strauss' core criticisms of the UN packaged into a single, brief passage. There is the belief that western liberal support for the UN is a symptom of a widespread relativism; the assertion that this same relativism puts dictators and democrats on the same moral plane, thereby compromising the true interests of the latter; and finally, the antique and very Straussian warning against tyranny.

Some strikingly similar anti-UN sentiments have also been expressed north of the US border by Stephen Harper and his party. In September 2012, Harper travelled to New York to accept a controversial World Statesman of the Year award, pointedly avoiding the opening session of the UN General Assembly. In his acceptance speech, Harper assured his audience that Canada was committed to the “wider interests of humanity.” But rather than clarifying what such a commitment meant, he spent most of his time explaining what it *did not* mean. Foremost, it did not mean “court[ing] every dictator with a vote at the United Nations or just going along with every emerging international consensus, no matter how self-evidently wrong-headed” (Harper 2012). Although he gave no hint of it to his prestigious American audience, Harper's remarks were not meant to describe the attitude of all Canadians. Speaking to a crowd of party faithful following his 2011 election win, the Prime Minister made it clear that under “the long Liberal era” which had just come to an end, Canada had been all too willing to “go along with everyone else's agenda” and to “please every dictator with a vote at the United Nations” (Harper 2011).

In a revealing 2003 speech to the conservative group Civitas, Harper attempted to isolate the deepest forces driving the Liberal Party's foreign policy, including its reflexive deference to the UN. He took as his case study “the response of modern liberals to the war on terrorism,” drawing special attention to Canada's refusal, under the Liberal government of Jean Chrétien, to join the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq. “The emerging debates on foreign affairs,” Harper proclaimed, “should be fought on moral grounds.” “As we have seen in recent months,” he continued, “these are debates where modern liberals have no answers.” He then went on to explain why “modern liberals (with the exception of Tony Blair)” had nothing to add to this debate. In language that could have been drawn straight from the pages of Strauss

or his neoconservative admirers, Harper complained that contemporary liberals are “trapped in their framework of moral neutrality, moral relativism and moral equivalence” (Harper 2003b).

## 6. THE COLLAPSE OF THE CONSERVATIVE REVOLUTION

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Harper believed that the moral decline of liberalism could be traced in part to the end of the Cold War. Here, too, his analysis ran very close to that of many Straussians, who have described the collapse of the Soviet Union as a moment of crisis for liberal democracy. Modern liberalism, as Strauss never tired of pointing out, rested on relativistic assumptions that could not possibly provide for an adequate theoretical defense of its own most cherished principles. But Strauss also argued that the “theoretical crisis does not necessarily lead to a practical crisis, for the superiority of liberal democracy to communism, Stalinist or post-Stalinist is obvious enough” (1989b, 98). What had saved liberals from lapsing into philosophical doubt about those ungrounded principles was the Cold War—the existential necessity of showing an unblinking resolve in the face of an equally resolute ideological enemy. With the fall of the Berlin Wall, however, the very circumstances that had shielded liberalism from self-doubt disappeared.

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***The enemy in question was, in Harper’s words, “radical socialism in its various forms.” In the international realm, this danger manifested itself as the evils of “fascism, communism and socialist totalitarianism.”***

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Harper acknowledged that for most of the twentieth century, liberals in Canada had been willing to stand and fight against the obvious evil of communism. Classical liberalism, which advocated open trade and freedom from state intervention, shared conservatism’s preference for private property, civil society and small government. To be sure, these groups offered very different grounds for their positions: liberalism claimed to be informed by a principally economic point of view, while conservatism was based on an appeal to tradition and a suspicion of the deleterious effects that an overly intrusive government could have on morality. But the core beliefs that they shared were enough to bring them together, especially when these same beliefs were threatened by a “common enemy.” The enemy in question was, in Harper’s words, “radical socialism in its various forms.” In the international realm, this danger manifested itself as the evils of “fascism, communism and socialist totalitarianism” (2003b).

In Harper’s version of history, Canadian foreign policy was put on its strongest footing in those moments when liberals joined conservatives to fight the common socialist enemy. But the liberals in question, it is important to note, were not necessarily those same people who made up the Liberal Party of Canada. As a concrete example of such a liberal-

conservative coalition, Harper mentioned only the Progressive-Conservative government of Brian Mulroney. Mulroney, tapping into the “Reagan-Thatcher revolution,” pushed economic liberalism and small government at home, and anti-communism abroad. The formula, Harper remarked, was wildly successful. Social-democrats and left-liberals (like those found in Canada’s Liberal Party), who had traditionally supported government intervention in the economy and a bloated welfare state, were at least partly converted to the austere logic of the Reagan-Thatcher economic agenda. “Socialists and liberals began to stand for balanced budgeting, the superiority of markets, welfare reversal, free trade and some privatization.” Just as important, however, were the triumphs of conservatism abroad, as Reagan and Thatcher held fast against the Soviet Union “until the Cold War was successfully and decisively concluded” (2003b; see also Harper 2014b).

The near-total victory of the Reagan-Thatcher revolution, however, was very much a pyrrhic one. A victim of its own success, the movement ironically dealt a crippling blow to the cause of conservatism. For one thing, conservative governments no longer had a monopoly on the winning economic formula, but instead discovered themselves competing for votes with liberals like Tony Blair in Britain, Bill Clinton in the United States, or the Jean Chrétien and Paul Martin team in Canada. But this was not the most difficult blow to the conservative cause, in Harper’s view. After all, the co-optation of the conservative economic agenda in a sense meant the battle had been won: although left-liberals had polluted the pure waters of

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***For Harper, modern liberalism’s decline into moral relativism went hand in hand with a growing indifference or blindness to the primary and vital task of self-preservation.***

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Thatcherite or Reaganite economics with public-private partnerships and other Third-Way confusions, their approach was “less clearly different from conventional conservative economics than any genuine socialism.”

The real crisis confronting conservatives after the Cold War, according to Harper, was not economic in nature, but moral. What impressed him most about Thatcher and Reagan was their unwavering purpose and principle in the realm of foreign policy. As he remarked on the occasion of Thatcher’s death in 2013, “the success of her economic policies...defined contemporary conservatism itself”; but “her greatest achievements...were surely on the world stage.” Thatcher, along with “the late U.S. President Ronald Reagan, and His Holiness Pope John Paul II... played a key role in the fall of the USSR.” “As a result,” Harper enthused, “millions now live with the dignity and freedom that she envisioned for them, during the darkest moments of the post-war years” (Harper 2013; see also 2014b).

While the defeat of communism marked the ultimate triumph of Reagan and Thatcher’s great moral vision, however, it also marked its eclipse. Those conservatives and

liberals who had traditionally found a common purpose in their opposition to communism now found that they had lost “all shares of a common external enemy” (Harper 2003b).

## 7. FINDING A MORAL DIRECTION AFTER THE COLD WAR

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For Harper, the great danger for the post-Cold War conservative movement was that in the absence of a great moral struggle there would be a temptation to move in the direction of a strictly economic conservatism. In other words, Harper feared that conservatism would increasingly be reduced to an expression of classical liberal economics stripped of any concern with traditional morality. This will come as a surprise to some commentators who have insisted that the Prime Minister is, at bottom, a follower of the libertarian economist and philosopher Friedrich Hayek.<sup>5</sup> But Hayek’s insistence that questions of justice have no role to play in a society that is spontaneously ordered by the selfish preferences of citizen/consumers is anathema to Harper’s insistence that “politics is a moral affair.”<sup>6</sup>

A purely economic conservatism, in Harper’s view, was not up to the task of meeting the great moral challenges of contemporary politics. Although he was confident that many economic conservatives shared the same moral goals as social conservatives, he worried that the narrowly liberal economic doctrines that they professed did not provide a robust defense of those goals. In particular, he worried that they were helpless to prevent the creeping influence of the liberal left. Economic conservatives espoused the morally neutral language of modern liberalism, but still believed it important to preserve many of our moral traditions; the “modern left,” on the other hand was intent on imposing their morally vapid vision over top of those traditions. After decades of Liberal rule, the left was allowing its “system of moral relativism, moral neutrality and moral equivalency...to dominate its intellectual debate and public-policy objectives” (2003b).

As troubled as Harper was by the Liberals’ debased social agenda, it was not the worst threat that he saw looming on the nation’s political horizon. Indeed, his deepest concern about the increasingly strong grip of the Liberal agenda was that it seemed to betoken the country’s slide into even more extreme ideological territory. The modern left, or elements of it, Harper warned, were moving “beyond [the] old socialistic morality or even moral relativism to something much darker.” Harper saw growing evidence that the left was in the grip of what he described as “a moral nihilism” (2003b).

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<sup>5</sup> See Gutstein (2014), as well as Patten (2008, 33-34). Academic and activist, Robin Mathews (2013) also labels Harper a Hayekian in a fiery article for the controversial leftist newsmagazine, *RadicalPress.ca*.

<sup>6</sup> Kristol (1970) offers an illuminating discussion of the deficiencies of Hayek’s amoral political theory, hitting upon many of the concerns voiced by Harper in his 2003 essay. For more on Kristol’s criticisms of libertarianism more generally see Dorion-Soulié and Sanschagrin 2014.

Here another illuminating parallel can be drawn with the thought of Strauss. One of Strauss' central criticisms of liberal relativism was that it could provide no defense against society's descent into nihilism. Many liberals who openly avowed relativism could still be counted on to defend their society's moral traditions from external enemies, but not so its internal enemies. The relativist, Strauss argued, "has nothing to say against those who unhesitatingly prefer surrender, that is, the abandonment of liberal democracy, to war" (1968, 223).

Strauss' warning almost perfectly mirrored Harper's own message to the economic conservatives that he wished to rally to his cause. As the US-led 'war on terror' switched into full gear, Harper was disconcerted by "the lack of desire of the modern liberals to fight." But he was even more distressed by what he said was "the striking hope on the Left that we actually lose." He then went on to suggest that he detected this more self-destructive attitude creeping into the public statements of Jean Chrétien, who on the anniversary of 9/11 made the "dark suggestion" or at least hinted, that "we deserved it" (2003b).

For Harper, modern liberalism's decline into moral relativism went hand in hand with a growing indifference or blindness to the primary and vital task of self-preservation. Here again, Strauss' thought proves illuminating. Strauss argued that liberalism, as it was originally conceived, regarded self-preservation as a right not just in a positive legal sense, but in a moral sense. This right, moreover, constituted the foundation or "basis" of every other right or moral claim upon which liberalism stood (Strauss 1936, 17-18). Ironically, the success of liberal governments in securing this right helped to render it less urgent and immediate. The liberal state, working in cooperation with modern science, was able to turn more toward satisfying an ever-expanding list of secondary needs and desires, which had the effect of further cushioning citizens from that most basic moral concern with self-preservation.

In Harper's understanding of Canadian history, a decline of the kind Strauss described had been overtaking the nation for at least forty years under the rule of the Liberal Party. Whereas in earlier times the Canadian state had cultivated a society ready to defend itself and its allies, it had in recent decades become an overarching bureaucratic order that ministered to the proliferating desires of an increasingly soft and selfish and public.

## **8. PIERRE TRUDEAU AND LIBERAL DECLINE**

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Harper traced the origins of this unfortunate transformation of the Canadian polity to the influence of one Liberal leader in particular: Pierre Trudeau. In the 1950s, at the height of the Cold War, the party was led by Louis St. Laurent, a determined anti-communist for whom

even Harper could confess admiration.<sup>7</sup> St. Laurent, however, seems to be the last leader in the Liberal lineage capable of winning any respect from the Harper government. Lester Pearson, St. Laurent's successor and a Canadian icon for his pioneering role in the development of peacekeeping, has been conspicuously sidelined by Conservatives. Baird, whose ministry is housed in a building named after Pearson, "treats this country's most celebrated diplomat like a contagion," according to one prominent historian (Cohen 2014).<sup>8</sup> But however little love Conservatives have shown toward Pearson, it is his replacement, Pierre Trudeau, who has inspired the most disdain.

In an article written six years before taking office, Harper, described modern Canada as little more than a "series of economic and psychological dependencies" left behind by Trudeau. Trudeau had put in place the "post-imperial pillars of bilingualism, socialism and centralism," in the process helping to cultivate a "cheque-book 'nationalism,'" where feelings of attachment to the state grew in proportion to social spending it disbursed (Harper 2000). Under Trudeau, the nation increasingly came to be seen as something that existed to serve the selfish desires of the individual, rather than as a higher good requiring personal sacrifice. "Rights" came to be understood as state-protected entitlements, divorced from any sense of reciprocal duty. Indeed duties, originally rooted in the moral responsibilities that tradition assigned to members of a particular society, were increasingly attacked in the name of rights (2003b). Harper bristled at the "totalitarian" effect of human rights commissions, those Trudeau-era inventions that allowed government to spread its quasi-legalistic bureaucratic machinery deep into the heart of civil society (quoted in Kwantes 1999).

To put all of this change in very broad terms, after Trudeau, the Canadian nation was no longer viewed as the embodiment of its people's moral goals, a higher cause for which its citizens were called upon to sacrifice and fight. Instead it became something remote and impersonal, an enormous and morally neutral administrative order that existed to shield one from the need for sacrifice of any kind. This sort of attachment to the Canadian state represented a relationship of convenience, rather than one of true loyalty. "After all," Harper remarked, "it is the government hand-out, not Canada, to which the Left is ultimately loyal." Indeed, he even speculated that the left would happily barter away its allegiance to a former enemy, if the price were right. Going out on a rather wobbly limb, he predicted that the left would eventually welcome annexation by Washington, once it realized "that the stronger U.S.

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<sup>7</sup> Indeed, following Russia's invasion of the Crimea, Harper delivered a fiery, not to mention strangely anachronistic, diatribe against communism which offered the former prime minister a rare, non-partisan nod (2014b).

<sup>8</sup> In his place, the Conservatives have hoisted the figure of Pearson's bitter rival, John Diefenbaker. The party's determination to rehabilitate the unpopular Diefenbaker has been most evident in the speeches of Foreign Affairs Minister Baird, who gilds the reputation of his political hero, Diefenbaker, with the most glittering tributes. As a glimpse at any one of these panegyrics reveals, the source of Baird's admiration was his hero's zealous defence of rights and unflinching anti-communism. He was a leader who, in Baird's words, was determined to "stand firm in an ever-changing world," who had a strong "moral compass" much like "this government, our prime minister, has today" (Baird 2014).



economy is able to provide greater government handouts than the Canadian state.” Harper also suggested that this call for annexation would give lie to the cosmopolitan pretensions of the left, since they would dress it up as a plea for “some kind of supranational institution” (2000).

Harper felt that Trudeau had left behind a Canada that was losing touch with its most important democratic values. Trudeau himself had exhibited what Harper described in one speech as a shameful indifference toward our democratic traditions: for instance, cavorting with Mao in China and failing to denounce the Soviet suppression of the Polish Solidarity movement. In this same speech, Harper voiced his fear that future Canadians “will fall even further in love with ease and convenience. And that they will not understand that their rights and their advantages, their peace and their security, were won by people willing to live and die for what is good and right” (2014b). By this he did not mean simply to point out that everything worthy in our society existed because of those willing to risk their lives for it. He was saying something more: namely, that only those willing to risk their lives for our society truly recognized what was worthy about it. He offered a more dramatic formulation of the same sentiment at the funeral of Corporal Cirillo, the soldier who was senselessly gunned during last October’s attack on Parliament Hill: “The only values really worth living for,” the Prime Minister eulogized, “are those worth dying for” (2014c).

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***Harper, like Strauss, saw the Cold War as an existential threat that affirmed the most basic moral commitments of Canadians. But with the final triumph of the West over communism, Harper claimed that many Canadians forgot why their country was worth fighting for in the first place.***

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Strauss’ writings pointed to a similar connection between the health of a society and the willingness of its citizens to risk their lives for it. In his early reading of Hobbes, Strauss identified closeness to the experience of death as the indispensable existential underpinning to liberal society. For Hobbes, the right to self-preservation—the right upon which all other rights and freedoms were founded—was itself based on a more fundamental and primal awareness: the fear of violent death (Strauss 1936, 15). Only when we face the terrifying prospect of violent death, perhaps most especially at the hands of a barbarian enemy who is monstrously heedless of this fear (127), do we truly recognize self-preservation as a moral good. The more we cushion ourselves with a life of “comfort and ease,” however, the more we cut ourselves off from the primal experience of terror:<sup>9</sup> “The bourgeois existence which no

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<sup>9</sup> Strauss emphasizes how almost inevitably the right to self-preservation expands into acquisitiveness—an expansion which is captured in the philosophical development from Hobbes to Locke. Given that the “goal of desire is defined by nature only negatively” as “the denial of pain,” the

longer experiences these terrors will endure only so long as it remembers them” (122). The ideal of a peaceful and prosperous world order, was for Strauss, incompatible with the moral awareness which served as the very foundation stone of our society. The danger lay less in the fact that such a society would be unprepared to fight for what it believes in than in the fact that it would believe in nothing (Norton 2005).<sup>10</sup>

## 9. CONCLUSION

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Strauss felt that the West had not yet lost touch with that primal moral awareness that issues from the fear of violent death. Although some liberals would nurture their utopian hopes in the UN no matter what, it was only too obvious to most objective witnesses that the institution was far from delivering on the promise of a peaceful universal order. The phenomena of Stalinism and post-Stalinism made it “clearer than it had been for some time that no bloody or unbloody change of society can eradicate the evil in man” (1964b, 46). No amount of UN consensus-building could overcome the hostility of the Soviet Union under a figure like Stalin. In effect, there did not truly “exist a universal federation of nations but only one of those nations which are called peace-loving.”<sup>11</sup> For Strauss the practical lesson was clear: “For the foreseeable future,” he observed, “political society remains what it always has been: a partial or particular society.” Now, as in ancient times, our society’s “highest task is self-improvement.” But its “most urgent and primary task,” Strauss declared, “is its self-preservation” (47).

Harper, like Strauss, saw the Cold War as an existential threat that affirmed the most basic moral commitments of Canadians. But with the final triumph of the West over communism, Harper claimed that many Canadians forgot why their country was worth fighting for in the first place. The situation was worsened by the election of Chrétien a few years later. In the domestic realm, this meant a return to some of the worst elements of the Trudeauvian statist tradition, including human rights commissions. In the international realm it meant the abandonment of much of our sovereignty to the utopian ideal of a neutral UN, where consensus was to be miraculously generated between democrats and dictators. Given this enervating combination of conditions, Harper feared that Canadians were acutely vulnerable to the terrorist threat that revealed itself so dramatically on 9/11. The post-Cold War Canada of Jean Chrétien and Paul Martin was unprepared to face up to this deadly new enemy, or for that matter, its own mortality.

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“satisfaction of wants is therefore no longer limited by the demands of the good life but becomes aimless” (1950, 250).

<sup>10</sup> And conversely, Strauss claimed that, “however much the power of the West may have declined, however great the dangers to the West may be, that decline, that danger—nay, the defeat and the destruction of the West—would not necessarily prove that the West is in a crisis. The West could go down in honor, certain of its purpose (Strauss 1964b, 44).

<sup>11</sup> Both West (2004) and Tarcov (2006) assume this to be a reference to the United Nations.

But Harper also saw in the terrorist threat the possibility for renewal. In an interview given shortly after winning office in 2006, Harper remarked that “For a lot of the last 30 or 40 years, we were the ones hanging back”—a remark that, as one critic observed, pointedly “dismissed Canada's peacekeeping history” (Dobbins 2006).<sup>12</sup> The Prime Minister was determined to cure the country of what he saw as its limp identification with the UN and peacekeeping, and transform it into a “courageous warrior” nation, as he would later put it (Harper 2011a; 2014d). To this end, within his first six years in office he increased the size of the military by a quarter and ramped up military spending beyond its Cold War peak (Engler 2012, 153, 154). He also enthusiastically embraced the “war on terror” in Afghanistan. In an interview during his first year as Prime Minister, Harper was surprisingly candid in describing the salutary moral effects that this conflict—and the encounter with death—was having on our troops. The war, he remarked, has “certainly engaged our military. It’s, I think, made them a better military notwithstanding—and maybe in some way because of—the casualties.” Nor were the effects of the encounter with terrorism restricted to the military. In a 2011 interview, Harper speculated that 9/11 had helped the country at large to become “more self-confident” as well as “more engaged” in the world.

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***The Prime Minister was determined to cure the country of what he saw as its limp identification with the UN and peacekeeping, and transform it into a “courageous warrior” nation.***

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These remarks came just months before Canada was to wind up its mission in Afghanistan, but Harper made it clear that the existential threat of terrorism had not gone away. “The truth of the matter is,” he opined, “there's so many different possibilities, manifestations of terrorism I think it is a case that we will have to be perpetually vigilant...And I just think that's going to be an ongoing reality...that's just life going forward I think in the 21st century, unfortunately.” As promised by Harper, there has been no shortage of dangers to capture the attention of Canadians. In the past year, the Prime Minister has sounded dire warnings about Russian aggression in the Ukraine and pledged military support to counter the burgeoning Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. But he has also taken every

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<sup>12</sup> In a 2011 interview, Harper offered the following heavily qualified support for peacekeeping: “I'm not dismissing peacekeeping, and I'm not dismissing foreign aid—they're all important things that we need to do, and in some cases do better—but the real defining moments for the country and for the world are those big conflicts where everything's at stake and where you take a side and show you can contribute to the right side.” As Michelle Shephard has pointed out, when politicians talk incessantly about these apparently more urgent threats, there is little appetite for squandering our military resources on peacekeeping missions far from home. And indeed Harper has not squandered them on peacekeeping. While most developed countries “have steadily abandoned peacekeeping...no nation has fallen off as dramatically as Canada,” which now has only 34 military personnel conducting peacekeeping activities abroad (Shephard 2014).

opportunity to remind Canadians that “violent jihadism is not just a danger somewhere else; it seeks to harm us here in Canada” (Harper 2015).

This new emphasis in Harper’s rhetoric on the threat that terrorism poses to domestic rather than international security is partly a reaction to the murders in Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu and on Parliament Hill; but it also reflects a longer-term shift in Canada’s security priorities that can arguably be traced back to 2011. That year saw the end of Canada’s combat mission in Afghanistan, a decade-long engagement that Harper recognized had pushed the public’s commitment to the breaking point (Clark, Chase and Taber 2008). It also saw the tabling of the government’s “Building Resilience Against Terrorism” plan, a counter-terrorism strategy aimed principally at protecting the Canadian homeland from attack. The strategy’s domestic focus had the advantage of being less expensive to pursue than engaging an actual enemy abroad.<sup>13</sup> But beyond any question of cost savings, this new agenda also helped to advance an important moral goal: it would serve to remind Canadians that jihadis do not limit their violence to foreigners, but seek “the annihilation of anyone who dares to be different from them, of everyone who does not share their narrow and oppressive world view” (Harper 2015). To put this in Strauss’ language, domestic terrorism would remind us that we are “a partial or particular society whose most urgent and primary task is its self-preservation.”

As Harper sees it, the threat of terrorism on our home soil has concrete political implications for the conservative movement in Canada. The common foe that was destroyed by the Reagan-Thatcher revolution has been replaced by a new, more nihilistic enemy, and conservatives once again have an enemy to rally against. But there is this difference: radical jihadism is much more diffuse and difficult to target than was state-organized communism. It is therefore not likely to be defeated by liberal capitalism. For this same reason, the new conservative revolution is unlikely to be undone by its own success.

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<sup>13</sup> Not coincidentally, 2011 also marks a turning point in the Harper government’s extravagant financial support for the military. Since reaching a post-World War II peak in 2009-2010, military funding has, according to Michael Byers, reached a historical low as a percentage of GDP (Byers 2014).

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